

Some Considerations about Demons in Mesopotamia

When analysing a mythical context or a particular ritual manifestation, in which a conventional “demon” appears, the first problem we have to face is to outline the characteristics of the entities we are dealing with, and the framework into which their behaviour or potentiality for action fit. “Demon” is in fact a generic term and it is used with ease in a very general way. The first limitation in the use of this term is caused by the fact that it belongs specifically to Greek culture. It expresses a series of meanings. In the Greek cultural context, “daimon” identifies something related to the extra-human sphere. Sometimes, it is used to characterise an element distinct from the dimension of *theos*.

In this paper, it will be necessary to make some remarks on the features of polytheistic religion and on the variety of extra-human entities that, together with the gods, participate in the construction of the mythical framework, which is at the basis of this religious form. Indeed, it is within the polytheistic structure that the variety of extra-human entities makes manifest the potential capability of the polytheistic religious system to exert sacral control over the organisation of complex societies. This is carried out by a range of beings with different and specific characteristics and tasks. Hence the crucial observation that entities carry out their function within the ritual action, which in turn contributes to the control over the order of that specific society, together with the gods’ cult. It is important to evaluate carefully whether or not the different entities appear in the mythical dimension. In this case, on the one hand, we need to examine the context and mythical phase of their action, while on the other, we need to examine their relation with other extra-human beings, as well as the state of co-existence or the opposition of their action. Following on from this, the role of these entities in the ritual action of the historical dimension should be investigated. Therefore, we need to single out the ritual typology and any relation to other entities involved in the same ritual or to other aspects of the cult of the gods.

As we have said, in the Greek culture, *daimon* has a variety of meanings that change over time. Its occurrences and the entities to which it is related are different and need to be evaluated carefully¹. The use of this

¹ In the tragedy *The Persians*, Aeschylus uses *daimon* to allude to the spirit of Darius, that is, to express something different from *theos*.

term and the context in which we find the entities should be considered precisely. In fact, no vague terms should be used to characterise extra-human beings as well as the ritual expressions that constitute the religious structure of human groups, that are distinguished by specific forms of social organisation and cultural characteristics.

At issue is clearly the analysis of the religious aspect of the society under investigation that should be framed in its specific context, considering such variables as the historical period, the geographical context, the environment, and so on. Thus, the definitions of the characteristic features of the demons in the Mesopotamian context, their function and their role within the religious systems of this area, bring forward a historical-religious problem.

In polytheistic religions, the gods are placed side by side with other extra-human entities, who, in spite of this, carry out functions and roles clearly distinct from those of the gods. However, these entities interact with the gods through a series of relations that operate at both mythical and ritual level. The common integration into the extra-human sphere reveals itself in different ways. These entities may appear acting as supporters or as enemies of the gods in the myth, that is to say, in a time when the characteristics of each extra-human being, as well as the personality aspects and competences of the gods, are established. The role played by each demon emerges, without risk of confusion, from the specificity of their ritual intervention.

There are several doubts and uncertainties that hinder the analysis of the available data. In fact, these sometimes offer incoherent or far from comprehensive results. However, the followers of the religious faith in question may not have perceived the picture as being as confusing as it seems to us. The myths in their tradition, referring to all these entities, were a part of their social structure. They also included the relevant rites or devices necessary to worship and to assure goodwill.

The conventional use of the term "demons" leaves unsolved the problem of the definition of such beings from an emic or etic perspective.

The term "demons" has often been interchangeable with that of "spirits", and sometimes "monsters" as well, emphasizing the aerial nature of these beings or the hybrid features that some of them show².

² G. Cunningham, "Deliver Me From Evil", *Mesopotamian Incantations 2500-1500 BC*. (Studia Pohl SM 17), Pontificio Istituto Biblico, Roma 1997, p. 39, has proposed the use of the term *daimon*, instead of the more meaning-loaded "demon", being these «divine agents capable of helping as well as harming rather than diabolic forces opposed to the senior deities». This proposal, while it has the merit of raising the problem related to terminology and interpretation, borrows the concept from a context alien to the Mesopotamian reality, with the consequent interpretative problems.

All these terms ("demon", "spirit", "monster") try to express one or more of the characteristics of these entities in our culture and language, in particular:

- their aggressive attitude that seeks to harm the patient or the human victim who is chosen as the target of their attack when instrumentally used by a third party;
- their relation with the ancestor spirits together with their aerial nature, which is constantly related to winds;
- their "hybrid" nature, typical of some of these beings.

In Sumerian and Akkadian, there is not a specific term for this type of being. The Sumerian *udug* (Akk. *utukku*) is often used in the singular to refer to a generic entity, or in the plural to designate a group or specific subtype of such beings³. Similarly, other terms are commonly used to describe groups whose characteristics are to be vaguely defined, as in the case of the Seven (Sibitti) or the Galla. They are described as a collective with minor distinctions, such as the big and small Galla. When a list of constituent members of a group is provided, these may vary. This piece of evidence may lead to the false assumption that demons are to be considered as a collective entity. However, apart from the Galla, each single entity is characterised by a distinctive complex of features and functions. The possibility of being assembled together in larger groups is, nevertheless, one of the characteristics of demons in general, not a constituent part of each being.

The individual profile of each of these beings is revealed by their capacity to intervene in specific mythical contexts, in which their particular functions emerge. Some hints about their role in ritual context may be inferred, even if the relation between the two contexts is not always unambiguous.

Physical characteristics, functions, actions, and results, are features that help shape the entity. These features are elements pertaining to the symbolic and metaphoric language, that, when combined with each other, contribute to define these complex beings, whose main feature is, not by chance, hybridity or indefiniteness. There is not a direct and exclusive relation between the features, on the one hand, and the being, on the other. The sum of these features and traits define the extra-human beings, even though single characteristics may be shared by different beings⁴.

³ See the article of M.J. Geller, *The Faceless Udag-Demon*, in this volume.

⁴ To this general consideration we must add space and time variables that condition the development of each being. The assumption that the concept of "demon" has been transmitted in space and time as a kind of immutable form, non-subject to historical developments, is misleading. This statement, obvious as it may seem, is often not taken into account.

The impression of overlapping among different demons, plus the blurred dividing line that distinguishes their behaviour, may be motivated by the lack of information we have. The sources, which are numerous but scattered over two millennia, are often not sufficient to frame the features of each figure, reconstruct its functions, or define the relation with the other beings of the same class. The documents from the third millennium are insufficient, often vague, and they only become more consistent from the beginning of the following millennium, when both the Sumerian and the Akkadian literature are best documented. Since some particular periods, that is the Old Babylonian and the Neo-Assyrian one, offer more information, the researcher feels tempted to tie together the abundant but heterogeneous data, as if they were equal in form, meaning, and purpose.

In the case of demons, however, the sources tend to offer further hints for investigation. In fact, the nature of the Mesopotamian archaeological and epigraphic sources does not always allow the combined analysis of different types of data⁵. This relation between archaeological, iconographic, and textual sources reaches its highest synthesis in the inscribed objects, for example, amulets. The main sources of information about demons are incantations, known mostly from tablets organised in series⁶ in later periods. These documents could be considered together as one literary product circulating within literate contexts. In addition, the inscribed apotropaic objects are a source in which the epigraphic and iconographic information are combined and whose medium and archaeological context suggest a practical use. Thus, incantation tablets have a more sophisticated, often descriptive and literary style, in opposition to the more practical and direct effectiveness of apotropaic objects.

Generally speaking, the content of incantations also shows a chronological development. The most ancient sources are brief incantations that might be collected and edited in single tablets. In some cases, for example the case of *udug-hul*, a more articulated organisation of the material is documented even for the Old Babylonian period⁷. These texts, while lacking rituals, do contain descriptions and mythological motifs. Rituals only begin to be included in later compositions. They differ from the pre-

⁵ On the other hand, the expected correspondence of this data may put the brakes on research.

⁶ This regards the development of tablet collections, known in Akkadian as Series (*iškāru*). This grouping together of tablets in a more or less organised textual collection is referred to as a “treatise”, “handbook” or “manual” for convenience. However, these terms fit only partially to the case of Mesopotamian documents; see the discussion in M.E. Couto Ferreira, *Shaping a Genre. Innovation and Tradition in 1st millennium B.C. Cuneiform Texts on Diseases of Women*, in I. Andorlini - D. Leith - A. Maravela (eds.), *The Texts of the Medical Profession in Antiquity: Genres and Purposes* (in press).

⁷ M.J. Geller, *Forerunners to Udag-Hul: Sumerian Exorcistic Incantations* (Freiburger Altorientalische Studien 12), Franz Steiner, Freiburg 1985.

vious incantations in that there is a diminution of lyricism in favour of a more technical and stereotyped language.

The exact nature or status of the demons is not clearly defined in the cuneiform sources. Their names are often preceded by the determinative *dīgir* (ᵈ). This is a feature shared not only by the gods, but also by “sacred” objects and animals, which suggest the idea of it pertaining to a common sphere of the extra-human, rather than to the gods’ class.

The ambiguity concerning their divinity is clearly expressed in Mesopotamian sources:

«He is not a god, but his voice is loud and his *melammu* is lofty» (*Utukkū lemñūtu* XII, 15)⁸

«The Seven, warriors without rival, their divinity (*ilūtu*) is different, their origin (*ilittu*) is distinct» (*Poem of Erra* I, 23-24)⁹

The author of the *Poem of Erra* probably made a wordplay based on the assonance of the words divinity (*ilūtu*) and origin (*ilittu*), highlighting that both are “strange” for the Seven.

While the matter of “demons,” divinity remains vague, that of their origin, on the contrary, is well known and constantly stated in the sources. All these beings are described as the offspring (*rehūtu*) of An, the god of Heaven, often born from the intercourse (*rehū*) with the Earth. Their origin is of course “strange”, as the *Poem of Erra* states, diverging from the creative process par excellence, that is Enki and the Mother Goddesses. The fact that they descend from a primeval god (An) or couple (Sky/Earth) links them to an earlier and chaotic phase, which lays the foundation for many of their characteristics and functions, particularly the aspect of their indefiniteness, which is evident from their appearance (indefinite/hybrid), their spatial setting (no home, suspended in liminal areas), and their actions (assistant/messenger of the gods).

Their primordial nature is reflected in their incompleteness when compared to proper gods. This incompleteness appears both in their roles as subordinates of deities, as well as in their physical features, which are indistinct, going from a multitude of parts of other beings to none.¹⁰

Beside their celestial origin, Sumerian and Akkadian myths underline the demons’ relation with the Netherworld. Demons are the bailiffs of Ereškigal who are sent to fetch the victims and lead them to the Netherworld. However, more often, they go together side by side with the

⁸ M.J. Geller, *Evil Demons. Canonical Utukkū Lemnūtu Incantations* (State Archives of Assyria Cuneiform Texts 5), Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, Helsinki 2007.

⁹ L. Cagni, *L'epopea di Erra* (Studi Semitici 34), Istituto di Studi del Vicino Oriente, Roma 1969.

¹⁰ M.J. Geller, *The Faceless Udug-Demon*, cit.

god who descends (*Nergal and Ereshkigal*) or rises (*Poem of Erra*) to or from the Netherworld¹¹.

Suspended between the Sky and the Netherworld, demons are allowed to move between these spheres¹² and to act in the in-between area, the Earth.

These preliminary considerations have found echoes in the other articles included in this volume. The question of the demons community (*pandemonium*) and their features, nature, and roles, has been the subject of F.A.M. Wiggermann (*The Mesopotamian Pandemonium: a Provisional Census*), while M.J. Geller (*The Faceless Udug-Demon*) has dealt with the specificness of a single demon and its lack of physical features. The specific nature of the demons status and mutual relation has been discussed by N.P. Heeßel (*Evil against Evil – the Demon Pazuzu*), who while focusing on the figure and role of Pazuzu, explores the power to harm other demons and apotropaic use, while avoiding the risk of damage to the amulet bearer. In her article (*Gods, Demons and Anger in the Akkadian Literature*), A.-C. Rendu Loisel has carried an in depth examination of demons as the conceptualisation of negative emotional states. Those ones are often produced by human intervention, that is the witch who manipulates the demons for her own misdeed. The relation between witches and demons was analysed by T. Abusch's article (*Witches and Demons in Ancient Mesopotamia*). P. Mander (*Non-corporeal Beings in Iamblichus' Chaldean Doctrine and in Mesopotamia*) dealt with the Mesopotamian religious tradition in Iamblicus.

ABSTRACT

Il presente contributo propone un'analisi delle caratteristiche generali di quella particolare classe di esseri sovra-umani convenzionalmente definiti "demoni" nell'ambito della religione mesopotamica. Inoltre, sono discussi i problemi di carattere metodologico di tale analisi da un punto di vista storico-religioso.

¹¹ A different case is that of Asag/Asakku, a well known demon whose striking central role as antagonist of the god Ninurta in *Lugal-e* has led to hypothesize the existence of two homonym figures; see S. Seminara, *Dagli sputi alle spade. Aspetti magici e rituali dell'uccisione* di Asag ad opera di Ninurta nel *Lugal-e*, in H. Waetzoldt (ed.), *Von Sumer nach Ebla und zurück: Festschrift, Giovanni Pettinato zum 27. September 1999 gewidmet von Freunden, Kollegen und Schülern* (Heidelberger Studien zum Alten Orient 9), Heidelberger Orientverlag, Heidelberg 2004, p. 248, with previous literature. Similarly, Namtar, who often appears together with Asag in different types of sources from the 11th. Mill., shows a complex chronological and typological evolution through the centuries and the sources that is not possible to analyse here.

¹² L. Verderame, *L'immagine della città nella letteratura sumerica*, in R. Dolce - A. Pelletieri (eds.), *Città nel Vicino Oriente e nel Mediterraneo. Linee di storia e di simboli dall'antichità ad oggi*, Flaccovio, Palermo (in stampa), p. 114 fn. 42.

The present article provides an analysis of general traits of those particular extra-human beings conventionally called “demons” found in ancient Mesopotamian religion. Furthermore, methodological problems on the topic are discussed according to a historical-religious point of view.